

MAY 06 1998

Fixing the Bay-Delta: What's at stake for Northern California

Over the next several months, Californians will be asked to weigh in on one of the most significant water and environmental policy decisions in history: how to fix the Bay-Delta system. Unfortunately, many Californians have never heard of the Bay-Delta, an elaborate maze of channels, sloughs and tributaries at the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and the watershed that feeds them.

For many Northern Californians, this may seem like just another chapter in the decades-long California saga that has pitted North against South over who has the rights to California's limited water supply. Taking this view, however, may miss the larger opportunity fixing the Bay-Delta represents, namely, developing a comprehensive plan that will improve the way we manage our natural resources from the Oregon border to San Diego and all points in between.

As suppliers or recipients of water from the Bay-Delta, however, all California counties benefit from this water delivery system that sustains the state's trillion dollar economy. The Bay-Delta is also one of the

world's largest estuaries, home to 750 plant and animal species, some found nowhere else on earth. The 27 northern counties I represent on the Bay-Delta Advisory Council serve as the water supply source to the Bay-Delta system.

The CALFED Bay-Delta Program, a joint effort among the state and federal governments and California's leading urban, environmental and agricultural communities, is developing a plan to fix the Bay-Delta system using a new approach to managing natural resources. It's based on the following seven principles: the solution must be affordable, implementable, reduce conflicts in the system, be equitable, feasible and not solve one problem by making another one worse. It sounds simple enough, but it actually represents a fundamental shift in the way water policy is developed. Furthermore, Northern communities have a seat at the table and thus, an opportunity to help shape the solution.

While every Californian depends on the Bay-Delta system for a strong state economy and a healthy environment, Northern Californians will also see

improved watershed management, potential new water storage and increased emphasis on the state's overall water use efficiency from the CALFED plan. But we're not there yet.

On March 16, the CALFED Bay-Delta Program released a draft programmatic Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report identifying three potential Bay-Delta solutions. Each of the three alternatives for

a Bay-Delta solution contains major programs to address water use efficiency, ecosystem restoration, watershed management, levee system integrity, water transfers and water quality. The alternatives differ primarily in how they would move and store water in the system.

Alternative 1, the Existing System Conveyance Alternative, would consider storage and make small improvements to the channel configurations of the

Delta.

Alternative 2, the Modified Through Delta Conveyance Alternative, includes additional storage and would make significant improvements to the channels in the Delta.

Alternative 3, the Dual Delta Conveyance Alternative, is similar to Alternative 2, and it also adds a new channel around the east side of the Delta. The solutions range in cost from \$9 billion to \$10.5 billion. All of them propose an increase in water storage.

Finding the best solution is not an easy task, but it is imperative. All Californians must concern themselves with finding a comprehensive solution that gives back to every county, but also requires some effort to conserve and better manage this precious resource. For our communities in the north, the proposed Watershed Management Coordination Plan is of benefit because it provides funds to implement this effort. And the Water Use Efficiency Program makes sense too, because it requires consumers in the south to conserve more water so they won't look to the north for as much.

Here in Northern California

counties, local residents have done a good job of voicing their views on such issues as water rights and flood management. It is now time to put that same kind of focus on the Bay-Delta.

But the first step to reaching any of these solutions is to ensure that the people this decision will impact are aware of the alternatives and let their views be known. If you drink water, eat fruits and vegetables, care about the environment or depend on a strong California economy, then you depend on the Bay-Delta. You have a historic opportunity to get involved. Don't let it pass you by.

Public hearings will be held in Chico on May 7 at the Chico Community Center on 545 Vallombrosa Ave., and in Redding on May 14 at the The Doubletree on 1830 Hilltop Drive.

All hearings begin at 7:00 p.m. with an informal Question and Answer session preceding at 6:00 p.m.

Information relevant to CALFED and the Bay-Delta is available to the public by calling 1-800-900-3587.

From Where I Stand

By Robert Meacher

*Plumas County Supervisor, Chair of the
Regional Council of Communities Water
Strategy, member Bay-Delta Advisory
Council*